

Social policy by other means from a comparative historical perspective
Continuity and change in nineteenth-century Belgium (1800-1920)

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Abstract

While social policies in the past are “by other means” if compared to traditional welfare states, historians have successfully established that they were much more conventional in their own time. Moreover, welfare states are historically grown constructs often still containing many pre-existing elements of precisely such social policies by other means, for example non-state provision. Belgium is an excellent example. Historically both nineteenth-century poor relief and early-twentieth-century social insurance were mixed private/public forms of provision and funding. Today the Belgian welfare state still retains fundamental aspects of non-state provision not usually associated with “conventional” welfare states in the core OECD.

Key words: comparative social policy, non-state provision, mixed economy of welfare, history, Belgium

A side effect of the firm establishment of the welfare state in post-war Europe and the related “welfare consensus” was that it implied a rather narrow understanding of social policy, leaving little attention for social policy by other means. Many historians focused merely on state welfare and the introduction of social insurance legislation, neglecting earlier systems of public poor relief or implying a firm cleavage between “a tale of the Poor Law which breaks off somewhere in the late nineteenth century, and the ‘rise of the Welfare State’ from the 1870s on in which the emergence of State institutions is traced without reference to the Poor Law past” (Thomson 1986: 373).

Today it is widely agreed that the origins of the modern welfare state are to be found not only in social insurance legislation, but at least as much in systems of poor relief that existed long before it. Even in the case of Germany, most famous for its Bismarckian social insurance legislation in the 1880s as the example par excellence of the “early” welfare state, Stolleis (2013: 25) convincingly argued that “older forms of safety merged into this new system, and not only as relics, but possibly also as the potential for future social policy”. Since the 1990s historians have successfully established that social policies often constituted a “mixed economy of social welfare” (Katz and Sachsse 1996, Harris and Bridgen 2007) involving different mixed private/public forms of provision. Van Kersbergen and Manow (2009) made important contributions not only by bringing in the role of religion in general and Christian Democracy and Catholic social thought in specific, but also by emphasizing that social policy was one of the decisive battlefields for the “culture wars” between liberalism and the Church (Van Kersbergen 2011). Ansell and Lindval (2013), too, recently studied late-nineteenth-century mixed private/public educational policies and pointed out the role of interdenominational struggle and ideology. Like these recent endeavours, this contribution explains the private/public intertwinement of social policies in the nineteenth century and their part in how today’s welfare state looks like. Studying the case of Belgium will make it

clear that some of the traits of non-state provision already apparent in early nineteenth-century poor relief still mark today's Belgian welfare state. The Belgian case was not explored in full in van Kerbergen and Manow's multinational volume (2009) and even Belgian historiography has largely lacked such a perspective, except for some notable exceptions such as Lis and Vanthemsche (1995).

This contribution's comparative approach thus lies in reflecting on the continuity (and change) in social policies in Belgium, more particularly poor relief and social insurance, from a historical perspective. A first, theoretical part will add historical perspective to what Seelkopf and Starke in their introduction called "theorizing unconventional forms of welfare production". Then, the empirical part gives a clear historical view of two main branches of social policy in nineteenth-century Belgium: the mixed private/public system of poor relief from the early-nineteenth century onwards and the provision of social insurances by mutual-aid societies (whose members paid to insure themselves against, among others, sickness and invalidity) and their incorporation in the national social insurance policy around the turn of the century in what became known as the system of "subsidized liberty". Explaining the continuity between the *ways in which* these social policies were constructed is the subject of the explanatory, third part of this contribution.

1. Theorizing social policy by other means: social provision and regulation before the welfare state

According to Orloff (2005: 196) "the term 'welfare state' has functioned as an accepted, if often anachronistic, shorthand for systems of social provision and regulation in the developed capitalist world." Our understanding of pre-welfare state social policies indeed gains more by considering social policy as a system of social provision and regulation rather than when such policies are seen merely as precursor of the welfare state. From a historical point of view,

looking to social policy from the point of view of today's welfare state overemphasizes not only 1) *state* provision (as compared to non-state provision) but also 2) the involvement of national government (as compared to local governments) and 3) social transfers and direct provision (as compared to regulation).

To begin with the third observation, social policy not only consists of organizing specific services to counter social needs (provision), but it also encompasses the framework of regulations and conditions within which these services can be organized in a consistent way (regulation). If social policy may be said to be a painting, then social regulation is the frame of the painting and social provision the painting itself. The painting can only be painted within the boundaries of the frame within which it takes shape. Therefore, speaking of systems of social provision *and* regulation is just “to underline that benefits are never delivered without some sort of discipline, regulation, or categorization” (Orloff 2005: 199). Skocpol and Amenta (1986: 132) essentially meant the same when they said to “think of social policies as coming into prominence” the moment when “state organized or regulated mass education,” and made “efforts to regulate industrial working conditions and environmental influences on people's health.”

For the largest part of the nineteenth-century, the national state in Belgium mostly served as a regulating power in the social field, and was not (directly) involved in its organization. Actual social provision was a responsibility of local governments, but largely depended on private welfare providers such as religious institutes and philanthropic societies, leading to various types of private/public cooperation. Therefore, following the first and second observation, the nineteenth-century context was one in which non-state provision and local government responsibility, within the framework of national regulation, were very conventional. In this context, the less visible social *regulation* by the state was proportionally even more important

in shaping social policy than in a system of full state provision (see also Ramesh and Bali's contribution).

Disregarding these three observations may lead to the oft-used but short-sighted image of the nineteenth-century state as an impotent "night watchman". This metaphor has been persistent in the general image of the nineteenth century as well as in the literature to date (for example Art 2004). Van der Linden (1996: 34) distinguished between the state's "passive behaviour" in the nineteenth century and its "much more active" behaviour from the end of that century onwards, defining "passive behaviour" as follows: "the state did not wish to organize social insurance itself and therefore left this responsibility to other institutions and provided supervisory guidance at most". This understanding of the state's responsibility was clearly measured by the modern standard of the state organizing social insurance itself. However, if measured using the contemporary context, the state's role was arguably much less passive than van der Linden assumed. Katz and Sachsse (1996: 15) discarded the image of a "passive state", asserting that from the early nineteenth century many governments "began to assume new responsibilities in areas such as education, mental illness, public health, and crime". Van Damme (1991: 449) rightly called it "a period in which the state developed an enormous administrative capacity regarding the management and regulation of social phenomena". The ultimate point is that the tendency to depict nineteenth-century policy as that of a "night watchman" is "largely because such [nineteenth-century] interventionism took rather different political and bureaucratic forms from those that they were familiar with a hundred years later" (Harris 1996: 52). Even in the period of the allegedly "much more active" state, social policy retained much of the "passive behaviour", in that social insurance was still not provided by the state itself.

Rather than a linear evolution between two clear-cut points and policies, "the development of the early welfare state must be seen as a slow, often changeable evolution on the mid-long-

term, as a process of trial and error” (Van Praet 2015: 20) or as shifts and combinations within the “Bermuda Triangle of welfare, constituted by the collective (society or state), intermediary organizations (communities, voluntary associations, self-help groups), and the individual” (Frankenberg 1996: 77). It downplays the clear-cut distinction, shows how what we call “modernity” bore the marks of “tradition” and indeed effectuated a long-lasting continuity. And in that gradual and non-linear evolution, many aspects characterizing this historical form of social policy by other means even survived in the more formalized twentieth-century social policy.

2. State, society and social policies in Belgium between 1800 and 1920

Nineteenth-century Belgium was deeply affected by French revolutionary and Napoleonic legislation. The French revolutionaries annexed the Southern Netherlands (Belgium to-be) in the 1790s, confiscated all religious properties and imposed their own reorganisation of the poor relief system. Two distinct administrative public institutions, both under municipal supervision, were set up: Welfare Offices for the organization of homecare and Commissions for Civil Hospices for the management of all the (confiscated) hospitals and other care institutions. Testifying to Napoleon’s pragmatic politics was a 1809 decree that allowed female religious to again work as nurses in what were now public hospitals (the religious’s own institutions before), even granting these religious institutes legal personality. This decree remained largely in force throughout the nineteenth century.

Much of this legislation survived the Belgian revolution of 1830. The Catholic clergy, the nobility and a group of young liberals had joined forces against the Dutch King Willem I and seized power under the heading of “unionism”. The 1831 Constitution and the municipal and provincial laws of 1836 completed the parliamentary monarchy’s multilevel governance.

After the traumatic experiences of a French Revolution that had banished religious institutes,

the Catholics were awarded the constitutional liberties of religion, association and education. This enabled the Church to develop its wide network of educational and charitable institutions. Liberals, on the other hand, were given their way with the freedom of opinion and press. Despite their initial “unionist” agreement in national politics, however, tensions between Catholics and liberals mounted from the 1850s onwards, occupying much of politics until the social question (and with it the socialist movement) emerged in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

2.1. Mixed private/public arrangements in nineteenth-century poor relief (1800-1920)

Nineteenth-century poor relief in Belgium was a local matter, and it increasingly relied on private, mostly Catholic, institutions. Although the French revolutionaries had dealt a serious blow to Catholic charity by confiscating its property and bringing its institutions under the supervision of the public Commissions, in early Belgium religious institutes were allowed to take back their old positions and found new institutions. An impressive boost in new foundations between 1830 and 1860 made the Catholic network of hospitals, specialized institutions, and schools flourish (Van Dijck and Suenens 2008). The public and the private sector were not however two separate circuits existing alongside each other, they were essentially intertwined (Van Molle and De Maeyer 2013) . Depending on the nature of the institution and its location, these local mixed private/public arrangements took different forms. By ranking them on a scale from more publicly to more autonomously organized (all four of them in between the *fully public* and the *fully private* institutions), I distinguish between four types (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here.

The first two types of institutions always existed, at least officially, within the public system.

In the “**employment**” type, public hospitals in large cities owned by the Commission employed religious institutes for the daily care of the hospitalized. The female religious, whose number and tasks were strictly determined, figured on the Commission’s payroll, and while the mother-superior sometimes still served in the early years as director, the women religious had little or no say in the overall management. However, the position in the public hospitals offered many advantages: the commission supplied room and board, a regular salary, a pension and additional material advantages. In the case of specialized urban institutions, or hospitals in the countryside, the Commission often used the model of an “**invitation**” where the management de jure lay with them, but de facto was left to a religious institute. Viaene (2001: 177) called this “an empire by invitation”: public poor relief invited private charity actors to take on duties that actually fell under public responsibility. In this sense it also closely relates to the “delegated governance” that Morgan and Campbell (2011) have addressed in modern welfare regimes. Specifically, this invitation type implied that the Commission was not directly responsible for the expenses, but that it agreed on a price with its “contractors”. Despite the sometimes far-reaching autonomy unique to this model, the “entrepreneurs” often found themselves in the most subservient positions. In practice, autonomy meant that the religious institutes themselves bore the entire risk of management and their institutions had to fight to financially stay above water.

Structural intertwining with private charity also came about in places where the institutions were not *officially* part of the public system’s legal framework. The third type involved private institutions that had independent management, but often with a structural dependence on the municipality, Commission or Welfare Office for direct **material or financial support**. These were often non-religious, philanthropic associations, but many religious institutes specializing in free home care qualified as well. The support varied widely: the use of a

house, support in kind and/or direct subsidies. In 1858, private institutions received a total of nearly BEF 40,000 in subsidies from the Belgian Welfare Offices (National State Archives [1862]). Although it was only a fraction of their total expenditure (never more than 0.5 per cent), of which the biggest part went to home care, this was a considerable amount of subsidy for those days. Admittedly, it is difficult to weigh these numbers because of the structural private/public entanglement in the sources, which is in itself a notable observation.

Even where institutions operated fully independently, they could be employed in the public system by admitting patients at the expense of the Commission or the Welfare Office. In this fourth type, the **“placement” procedure**, the private institution and the Commission agreed on a daily rate per patient and a maximum number of patients, an arrangement proving attractive for both parties. The Commission did not have to establish its own hospital and could negotiate a daily rate relatively lower than the amount charged to the institution’s paying patients. The institution itself enjoyed a stable source of income and still retained its full autonomy. Placements were a widespread phenomenon in the countryside and were organized by the Welfare Office in municipalities that did not have any hospitals and hence no Commission.¹ In 1858 the share of private hospitals in the reimbursed placement costs still accounted for about one-third of the nearly BEF 140,000 that Welfare Offices spent on placements in hospitals (National State Archives [1862]). Even in spite of a growing share of public hospitals, it should be kept in mind that many hospitals in the countryside while officially public were run by private actors following the “invitation” type. The Welfare Offices also spent BEF 5,000 and over BEF 67,000 for placements in institutes for the deaf-mute (all private) and psychiatric asylums (43 of the 59 private) (Lentz 1866).

The four types co-existed throughout the nineteenth century and even into the twentieth century. Only the “invitation” type became less common due to the political and ideological

¹ In 1856, Belgium had around 2,500 Welfare Offices but only 174 Commissions (Lentz 1866).

sensitivity following the “culture wars” in the second half of the nineteenth century, as well as some forms of the “support” type, especially, direct subsidies to religious institutes. But the “employment” and “placement” types proved long-lasting.

Where, then, should we place the national government in all this? The cliché of the nineteenth-century “night watchman” state, if at all helpful, underestimates the role of the state within the whole system. First of all, the state contributed to the costs of helping abandoned children as well as the deaf-mute, unfortunates who could not be blamed for their own situation and for which the local authorities could not be expected to take all responsibility. More common still was that the state supplied extraordinary subsidies for covering expenses of starting up, renovating or purchasing materials and equipment. This way the government subsidized psychiatric institutions, training workshops and industrial schools. Though it is difficult to distinguish the different categories and to retrieve the allocations figuring in the budgets, around 1860, these expenses roughly amounted to BEF 250,000, or about 2 per cent of the Ministry of Justice’s budget (Parliamentary Documents 1863).

The way in which national government influenced the poor relief system’s financial foundations most strongly, however, was through national legislation. Poor relief depended mainly on two financing sources: public funds and private charity. The Commissions and Welfare Offices often administered a collection of immovable goods confiscated during the French period. The revenues these goods produced provided them with the necessary means to fulfil their legal task. In the event of insufficient funds, the law prescribed that the local authorities must cover the deficit. On the other hand, the network of care institutions was maintained largely because rich benefactors founded or supported institutions.

However, it was not that there was a public sector funded by public funds and a private sector funded by private charity; public and private were essentially intertwined. Some private

institutions received direct government subsidies, while others could expand their private services as a result of a steady income from placements reimbursed by the local authorities or the Welfare Office. In turn, local aristocrats made gifts or bequests to the local Commission or Welfare Office. In a statistical report on charitable institutions, the Ministry of Justice remarked that “the sentiment of charity ... inspires frequent gifts in favour of the public charitable institutions” (Lentz 1866: 22). In the first two decades of Belgian independence, between 1831 and 1850, the public system received more than BEF 18,000,000 from gifts and bequests, and in the following decade alone this amounted to more than BEF 22,000,000. Thus, even the financial foundations of the system reflected its mixed character.

The impact of national legislation would become particularly apparent when “culture wars” between Catholics and liberals from the late 1850s onwards started to affect poor relief’s financial foundations. The quick succession of events since the French Revolution had resulted in a complex set of different legal codes, ranging from the Civil Code to Dutch decrees, providing a regulatory framework. For example, religious institutes working in public hospitals needed official recognition by royal decree, which also set a limit to the number of nurses they were allowed to employ in the hospital. The first Belgian cabinets, fond of inviting private, religious charity into the public system, were lenient in putting into practice these regulations and gave free rein to private charity. Private donors were allowed to establish their own “foundations” or to appoint someone of their choice to administer their gifts or bequests. Increasingly secular liberals noticed grudgingly how the Church used such constructions to support existing and found new Catholic hospitals (run by religious institutes), thus firmly re-establishing the social influence they had lost with the French revolution.

The first liberal-only government taking power in 1847 altered course radically, stating that Catholic policy had led to “a bunch of private institutions, not in any way linked to the public

administration, pretending to enjoy legal rights and hiding from every legal control” (Recueil 1850: 282). In 1857, a moderate Catholic government made an ultimate attempt to settle the question by granting all charitable institutions limited legal personality, to the great indignation of the liberal opposition, whose street protests against what they called the “law of the convents” caused the government to resign. In spite of several critical verdicts by different courts, the new liberal government put an end to the possibility of administering own foundations in new legislation in 1859 and 1864. Donors and their preferred beneficiaries resorted to semi-legal alternatives rather than making use of the legal system. In many cases, religious institutes made use of a “straw man” who owned in their place. It was only in the 1920s that the issue was eventually settled. In the meantime, the mixed landscape of the public poor relief system remained essentially the same, with minor revisions of legislation de facto institutionalizing some aspects (for example the “placement” procedure).

2.2. Mutual-aid societies and social insurance: “subsidized liberty” and the origins of the Belgian welfare state (1850-1920)

When in the late 1840s Belgium was hit by a major economic and agricultural crisis that also fostered social unrest, the national government considered the spreading of the self-help and mutual-aid ideas to be the most productive countermeasures. Already in 1848, the parliament agreed to the extra expenses of BEF 200,000 “to foster the establishment of provident funds in favour of the working class,” of which BEF 30,000 was aimed at granting a limited subsidy by means of encouragement to both existing and newly-found mutual-aid societies, which typically covered loss of income due to sickness for members paying monthly fees (Pasinomie 1849: 146, 1850: 294). In the meantime, the government had prepared a bill that would follow these temporary measures, resulting in the Mutual-Aid Societies Act of 1851, which encouraged associations to apply for legal recognition in exchange for a number of limited financial advantages such as exemption from stamp tax (Pasinomie 1851: 73-79).

While it is true that the government seemed wary of revolutionary activities hidden under the cloak of mutual-aid societies (Rezsohazy 1957: 71), the bill was seen as interventionist enough by contemporaries, perfectly reflecting the premises also underlying the poor relief system. A set of strict conditions had to be met by the associations, legal recognition had to be approved by royal decree, a Permanent Commission was installed to follow up on the matter and report back to the government, and the Ministry of the Interior gave triennial prizes to the financially most well-organized societies (Rapport 1851). A year previously, the government had also established a state-run annuity funds (merged in 1865 with a state-run savings banks and since known as the ASLK), hoping that workers would affiliate to build up some savings as a pension (Companje et al. 2009). This role of the state harmonized perfectly with the prevalent discourse: “A government,” a parliamentary report stated, “cannot do everything, as some reformers would have it, but ... is not at all condemned to do nothing either, as some try to sustain, [it] can play an honourable part [and] can stimulate, encourage and support a whole lot of institutions” (Parliamentary documents 1851: 1). Far from being limited to Belgian politics, this discourse circulated in the transnational space of social reform among bourgeois elites rallying around a conservative social reformism typically formulated at international congresses, as an alternative to revolutionary sentiments (Leonards and Randeraad 2010).

Though the Ministers of Justice and the Interior hoped and expected an increase in mutual-aid societies, the years that followed made abundantly clear that the 1851 Act had in fact a very meagre impact. The Permanent Commission’s president had to admit in 1856 that the financial advantages “had not seemed considerable enough to make a great number of associations profit” (Vischers 1857: 18). Apart from the financial advantages stipulated in the 1851 Act, the national government only provided limited start-up subsidies for societies (never more than BEF 150 each) and premiums for the award-winning associations. Only after 1886 did the number of recognized mutual-aid societies start to grow exponentially. In

the spring of 1886 heavy strikes in the coal basins of Liège, followed by brutal actions of the police and the army, had sparked an unforeseen outburst of social unrest, making the Catholic government recognize the gravity of the situation. It was the start of an unprecedented growth of new legally recognized (often Catholic) associations. While at the end of 1885 still only 207 such associations existed, this number had already increased fivefold by the spring of 1897 (*Revue du Travail* 1897).

The exponential increase of mutual-aid societies in the late 1880s and the public demand for legal reform after 1886 paved the way for more state intervention, but only with the Catholic government pulling the strings. Following the report of the newly-installed Labour Commission, a system of provincial and regional committees was set up, through which the provinces from then on annually distributed BEF 23,000 of subsidies (*Pasinomie* 1887, *Du Sart de Bouland* 1890). However, both the Labour Commission and the Permanent Commission emphasized the need for a new law modifying that of 1851 (*Commission du Travail* 1887, *Rapport* 1890). Not only socialists but also Christian Democrats and many Social Catholics admired and hoped to follow the German example of Bismarckian state-funded insurances. An international gathering of Social Catholics in Liège in 1890 had even exerted pressure on the conservative Catholic government by proposing a similar system: funded by compulsory contributions of employers and employees, and with public services where no mutual-aid society existed (*Van Meulder* 1997).

Significantly disregarding the advice of their own party members at the Liège congress, the Catholic cabinet did not set course for a Bismarckian-like social insurance system, on the contrary. The Catholic government was determined not so much to expand social policy but to expand it in ways that strengthened their own institutions. Catholics had only regained control over national government in 1884, after liberals had tried to secularize and centralize education during the so-called “school war” between 1879 and 1884. Seeing this as an attempt

to abolish their influence in local schools (both private and public) and as a frightening example of institution-building by the state, Catholics opted to build and strengthen their own private network of institutions. They thus anticipated losing government power and being left with empty hands when adversaries would simply reverse their government policy. Socialists, too, increasingly emerged as a powerful adversary, with the establishment of their political party in 1885, their appearance in parliament, and, not unimportantly, a growing socialist labour movement.

The new Mutual-Aid Societies Act of 1894 did nothing more than remove the most important obstacles from the 1851 Act and expand the advantages of legal recognition. Not a single word was mentioned on the conditions or the apportioning of state subsidies, which hence continued to be remunerated not under the law, but by ministerial decrees issued by the administration (Pasinomie 1894). The 1894 Act was significantly modified in 1898, which stated in no uncertain terms that only recognized associations would from now on qualify for any governmental subsidies. In doing so, the Catholic government not only tried to force socialist associations to apply for recognition but also attempted to get control over the more than BEF 130,000 of provincial subsidies annually accorded in 1897, at the same time overruling liberal or socialist provinces such as Hainaut or Antwerp that were still supporting non-recognized socialist associations (Rapport 1897, Van Meulder 1997). The same argument was more clearly expressed in a report of the Senate (Parliamentary documents 1912: 3) stating that “it seemed essential to not let the local governments by the apportionment of their subsidies paralyze the measures of precaution and control adopted by the state.”

With the new laws on mutual aid the Catholic government decisively set course for a system of “subsidized liberty” (*liberté subsidiée*): private societies enjoying legal recognition provided social insurance on a voluntary basis, but the government held a firm grip by granting a wide range of subsidies. Separate bills on old-age pensions and invalidity

insurance, adding to the steady stream of legislation, followed the same underlying principles. From 1891, the government encouraged societies that provided old-age pension schemes for their members through an account with the General Annuity Funds, as the government's hope in 1850 that workers would affiliate themselves had turned out to be a complete failure (Rapport 1893: 44-48). These expenses included personal incentive bonuses as well as subsidies for mutual-aid societies acting as intermediary (Rezsóhazy 1957). They steadily grew from BEF 13,500 in 1891 to no less than BEF 250,000 in 1899 and were confirmed by a new law on old-age pensions in 1900. Besides the extra subsidy for the society, individuals were also encouraged to affiliate through a mutual-aid society because the law made the same deposit much more profitable through an intermediary than direct affiliation (Clement 1999).

Its policy on the invalidity insurance was in many ways characteristic for the Catholic government's power politics. In the 1894 Act the government had already stimulated the establishment of federations, which covered the difficulties their affiliated societies could not solve on their own, such as reinsurance for long-time invalidity (granting benefits beyond the usual six-month period granted by a health insurance). From 1903 onwards, special grants (up to BEF 150,000 in 1904) were issued quietly by royal decree (Rapport 1906). These royal decrees were apparently not published in the official bulletin as was usual and mandatory, and were reportedly used exclusively in favour of Catholic federations. Only years later in the parliamentary discussion of a new law on federations, socialist representatives denounced these abuses. One of them aptly summarized the government policy of administrative and ministerial action as "leaving to the executive power represented by the Ministry of Labour the exclusive care of regulating state intervention regarding subsidies and other advantages, following the pleasure of the minister." (Parliamentary proceedings 1912: 1024) The regulations regarding the criteria for subsidies for invalidity insurance that the Minister of

Labour had drawn up in an official circular only in 1906 were eventually enacted in 1912.

This 1912 law addressed a wide array of subsidies for federations (Barnich 1911).

On the eve of the First World War, social provision had not only undergone a major transformation, but it had also expanded enormously. Almost half a million workers were affiliated with about 4,000 mutual-aid societies (Companje et al. 2009). By 1914, the Ministry of Labour budgeted sums of almost BEF 1,000,000 for subsidies to mutual-aid societies and federations, and of BEF 1,600,000 for subsidies to societies responsible for old-age pensions (Parliamentary documents 1913). But the direct pension contributions of the state, established since the 1900 Pension Act, represented with BEF 17,840,000 the biggest slice of the budget by far. Together these posts made up no less than 75 per cent of the Ministry's entire budget.

If the outbreak of the First World War hadn't thrown a spanner in the works, Belgium might even have had its own law on compulsory social insurance in 1914 (Companje et al. 2009).

The conservative Catholic government had always resisted compulsion, even when progressive Christian Democrats had made their appearance in the Catholic government in 1907. After enduring debates with socialists presenting their own statist proposal, the government passed a bill by large majority of votes in the Chamber of Representatives in the spring of 1914 which only needed to be confirmed by the – reluctant – Senate. The compulsory social insurance system included did not, however, imply a break with the system of subsidized liberty, to the very frustration of socialist and liberal politicians who favoured instead the establishment of a neutral public service. The compulsory social insurance did not come into being until after the Second World War.

3. Explaining the continuity and change in Belgian social policies: ideology and power

How, then, can we explain that the social insurance policy emerging around the turn of the twentieth century, though reflecting a new sort of social policy, mirrored at least *the way in*

which poor relief had long been organized – that is, by private providers in close cooperation with the government? Indeed, the continuity is all the more remarkable when taking into account the drastically changing social and political context around the turn of the century, with ongoing industrialization, tentative democratization, emerging labour and socialist movements, and not in the least the expanding role of the state. Essentially, many explanations for the continuity between the poor relief and social insurance system have some connection to the concepts of ideology and power.

3.1. Ideology...

The most fundamental continuity lay in the ongoing conflicting visions on social policy: one that saw modern government, especially the state, as responsible for regulation *and* execution of social policy versus one that accepted the state only as the ultimate regulator, and not provider, of an organic field of social policy providers grown from below. During the nineteenth century, this conflict led to the well-known “culture wars” between secular liberals and Catholics. Liberal governments interpreted the existing legislation to their will and used their administrative power to press home their arguments. After 1884, the Catholic governments did the same in their political fight against the socialist movement. The Catholic government greatly feared the loss of their power and by building a network of intermediary organizations hoped to anticipate such a calamity. Of huge importance in fuelling these dynamics of power politics was how conservative Catholics *perceived* the socialist threat and how heavy rhetoric in the socialist *discourse*, rather than their all in all reformist *practice*, only strengthened the image, and thus their determination in their policy. These and other ideational factors in social policy change have also been put to the front in more recent cases of social policy change (Béland and Waddan 2012). As a result, the system of social insurances on the eve of the First World War did not in any way resemble the state-led,

centralized and compulsory system the socialists favoured but to the contrary a system of voluntary provision organized by local and regional societies and subsidized by the state.

The Catholic government's abhorrence of the socialist ideal of a centralized state policy, just as its abhorrence of the liberal ideal of a strong secular state, was of course also prompted by ideological motivations. The fear of an all-encompassing and overpowering state absorbing civil society (and, of course, the Church) was never far away. Around 1850, Belgian Catholics shared this concern with moderate unionist liberals. Their preference for the mixed private/public poor relief system was underpinned by a transnational discourse of conservative social reformism, widely shared and typically heard at international congresses. Gradually, Catholics started to develop corporatism as an answer to the social challenges and the equally-resented 'extremist' alternatives of liberalism and socialism. Not only the conservative Catholic governments after 1884, but also the Social Catholics and Christian Democrats thus attached great importance to the intermediary role played by mutual-aid societies and federations. The individual, weak in his isolation, should be able to resort to social relations and association to protect him from the absorbing power of the state. Just as private charitable institutions and voluntary associations, "the important role that mutualist associations have to fulfil in our modern society" was therefore stressed (Rapport 1897: 4). Even those among Catholics who favoured state intervention emphasized the need to respect the existing initiatives originating from society only by supplementing rather than replacing them. State intervention had to meet a *need* of some kind, a need caused by the insufficient, inadequate or non-existent provision of private or social actors. If early advocates favoured corporatism as a romantic ideal against any state interference, corporatism gradually came to include a measured and moderate form of state intervention. Thus, the discourse that underpinned the Catholic preference for "subsidized liberty" later became known as the subsidiarity principle, first coined in the papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* in 1931.

3.2. ... and power

There was a remarkable twist around the apparent Catholic abhorrence of statist policy that shows how ideology could be set aside by sheer power political reasoning. In principle, Catholics had always favoured decentralized government and local autonomy, understandably affected by the opposition against and abolishment of the Church's influence of successive absolutist governments. During their era in power, liberal cabinets used their power in smart ways to outflank parliamentary debate or resistance from lower levels; it was part of the nineteenth-century political culture of majority cabinets, ministerial autonomy and power politics shared by the two parties. Adding to this the traditionally liberal power in the cities, Catholics during this era had expected much from the provincial authorities to defend their interests. But by the end of the century, things had taken a turn. It was now Catholics who held firm power on the national level, and the socialist threat was coming from the provincial authorities (for instance in Liège and Hainaut) and from the cities. Provincial authorities were undermining Catholic national policy by subsidizing non-recognized socialists mutual-aid societies. Despite their discourse against an overly powerful state, Catholics succeeded in centralizing the decision-making on subsidies. Ironically, Catholics thus used their power to avoid state provision or state insurances (in favour of non-state provision), but at the same time took power away from the local and provincial authorities in favour of the national government. So, put differently, centralization (but not statism) was allowed if it could strengthen political power. The complex multilevel governance in Belgium was thus not only an aspect of the contextual changes but also one of the tools used by political actors.

That social policy was realized in close cooperation with a field of voluntary associations was the result of a deliberate government policy pursued by means of a wide range of governmental support strategies. This was as true for the local system of poor relief and health care as it was for the system of social insurance, for the liberal as well as for the Catholic

party, and for the national as well as the local level. Just as local authorities cooperated with private partners in ways varying greatly from case to case, the state made use of subsidies with having its mind on a certain goal. For instance, to help the mutual-aid societies keep their administration in order and found it on a scientific mutualist methodology, the national government first only awarded prizes for the best-run societies, then later also gave them subsidies to double-check the accounts, and finally even paid for a permanent secretariat including a secretary on its own payroll. The growing dependence on state subsidies provided the government with the opportunity not only to stimulate new forms of services but also to impose standards of quality such as minimum benefits for the existing services. But this would not remain one-way traffic. Thanks to its campaign of stimulating federations the government contributed to the emergence of national alliances of the Catholic, neutral, socialist, liberal and factory-related mutual-aid societies, which obtained legal recognition in 1906, 1908, 1913, 1914 and 1920, respectively (Companje et al. 2009). Acting as the exponents of their respective movements they gradually gained power in decision-making. Not only did they influence the positions of their respective political parties from within, but they also became important stakeholders in government circles, to be taken into account when outlining social policy.

This clearly involved the same “interplay of political institutions, interest groups and public opinion” that Morgan and Campbell (2011: 219) also identified in the development of the “delegated” welfare state in the US. There is, however, a slight but meaningful difference between the delegated governance that now characterizes the US and the sort of mixed private/public forms historically prominent in Belgium. As the name of the concept indicates, “delegated governance” is about government delegating a certain responsibility to non-state providers in order to make it more defensible to public opinion and vested interests. While the eventual outcome may be little different, historically in cases such as Belgium this mixed

private/public intertwining had grown the other way round. Private nonprofit initiatives preceded government action, with government and especially the state only taking action in the event of insufficient provision.

Conclusion

The remnants of this historical example of social policy by other means remain visible even in the Belgian welfare state today. Private hospitals, often part of a national Christian alliance, still make out a big part of the health care system and mutual-aid societies are still responsible for the execution of insurances against sickness and invalidity. However, this continuity is not static, and historicism is not nostalgia. One should be able to say that policies which are now labelled social policy by other means were more conventional in their own period of time, that these policies reflected the then prevailing views on what social policy was and how it had to be put into practice, and that it is fundamentally unhistorical to weigh nineteenth-century social policy against the welfare state of today; without necessarily seeming to imply or unwillingly give credit to the glorification of those systems, inspired by political motivations.

The main conclusion is that, if Belgium with its system of “subsidized liberty” today is a welfare state with accents of non-state provision, this can be traced back to nineteenth-century social policy. An improved understanding of the nineteenth century as a key period in the formation of the current welfare state prevents us from accepting either a belief in an exaggerated discontinuity between poor relief systems and social insurance systems, or in a too-linear evolution from “traditional” to “modern” systems of social policy, and also defies any caricatural image of the same nineteenth-century state as a mere “night watchman”. It contributes not only to the “explanatory integration” (Hacker 2005: 128) of why the modern welfare state has taken its specific shape, it also establishes that social policy by other means is part of the historical development of the welfare state. Indeed, the power politics resulting

from the nineteenth-century “culture war” between the modern state and the Church, between radical liberals and intransigent Catholics, paved the way for a welfare state that was not conceived as a centralist state monopoly but on the contrary was given shape by and executed through an expanding network of social movements and organizations.

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